

IDAHO FISH AND GAME
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Norton, Kempthorne Ink Wolf Pact

Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne and U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton signed an agreement Thursday that changes who manages reintroduced wolves in Idaho, but not substantially how they are managed.

"Wolves have thrived in Idaho far above expectations," Norton said. "We've reached the point biologically where management should be turned over to the state, which is in the best interest of both the wolves and the citizens of Idaho who live near them."

The memorandum of agreement they signed in a ceremony in the Governor's Boise office gives Idaho the lead role in most wolf management in the state south of Interstate 90 under the authority of section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act.

"This agreement gives Idaho the flexibility to take over many of the wolf management responsibilities currently performed by the federal government, the day-to-day operations of wolf management," Kempthorne said. "While total state management of these fully recovered wolf populations remains the ultimate goal, today marks an important step forward for Idaho."

Livestock operators will continue to report wolf problems to USDA Wildlife Services, but others with complaints or questions about wolves now should contact the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Idaho Fish and Game will manage wolves under the provisions of the Idaho Wolf Conservation and Management Plan of 2002 approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), but USFWS will retain all law enforcement authority until the wolf is removed from the endangered species list.

Until Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973, the states retained the authority to manage wildlife within their borders. But, with the act, the federal government took over responsibility for wildlife deemed threatened or endangered, including gray wolves.

In 1995 and 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced 35 wolves into central Idaho. Since then, their numbers have increased steadily, and by the end of 2005 they had grown to about 600 wolves with 36 verified breeding pairs and 61 documented packs well distributed throughout Idaho.

"The people of Idaho have made a home for the biologically recovered population of wolves. Now we need to get back into our rightful role in managing that population," Fish and Game Director Steve Huffaker said.

The Department, with seven regional offices and 90 conservation officers scattered around the state, has the ability to respond to wolf issues in a way the federal government can't.

The agreement between Idaho and the Interior Department is an interim step in removing wolves from the endangered species list, but Huffaker is concerned about people's expectations after the transfer of authority. As long as wolves remain on the endangered species list, hunting will remain prohibited and state officials won't be able to do anything the federal officials aren't already doing.

Wolf supporters say the state should leave wolves alone. Wolf opponents would like to reduce the wolf population to the minimum number required under the recovery requirements. "Neither side is realistic," Huffaker said.

"We think they should be managed like other large carnivores," Huffaker said. Once removed from the list, Fish and Game would manage wolf numbers through regulated hunting like black bears and mountain lions.

Until wolves are delisted, the agreement between Idaho and the Interior Department gives the state the authority to:

- Take over most wolf management south of Interstate 90 in Idaho as the designated agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
 - Handle landowner, outfitter and livestock operator wolf problems, and authorize lethal and non-lethal methods to reduce or resolve wolf-livestock conflicts and in some cases to reduce impacts on wild ungulates under the provisions of the 10(j) rule.
 - Investigate wolf kills and depredation incidents in coordination with Wildlife Services.
 - Issue wolf take permits for scientific research, and for other specific reasons.
 - Conduct monitoring, research, outreach and agency coordination.
- State and federal officials say the agreement is an interim step in removing the wolf from the protection of the Endangered Species Act. Wolves were reintroduced in central Idaho under Section 10(j) of the act, which labeled reintroduced wolves in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming as a "non-essential, experimental population." In early 2005, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service revised the rule, changing the way reintroduced wolves can be managed. Among the changes was the provision that allows Idaho to take over most management aspects under the agreement negotiated with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and recently signed.

"Wolves are considered biologically recovered in the three states, but they cannot be removed from the list until each state has adopted a wolf management plan acceptable to federal regulators," Norton said. "Plans for Idaho and Montana have been approved. Wyoming's plan has not. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working on a proposal to delist the wolves."

"Until we can do that, however, we want to recognize Idaho and Montana's management plans and give them as much opportunity as allowed by law to take over management of the species," she said.

To read the memorandum of agreement go to: <http://pacific.fws.gov>; or for the Governor's news release: http://gov.idaho.gov/mediacenter/press/pr06/prjan06/Pr_001.htm.